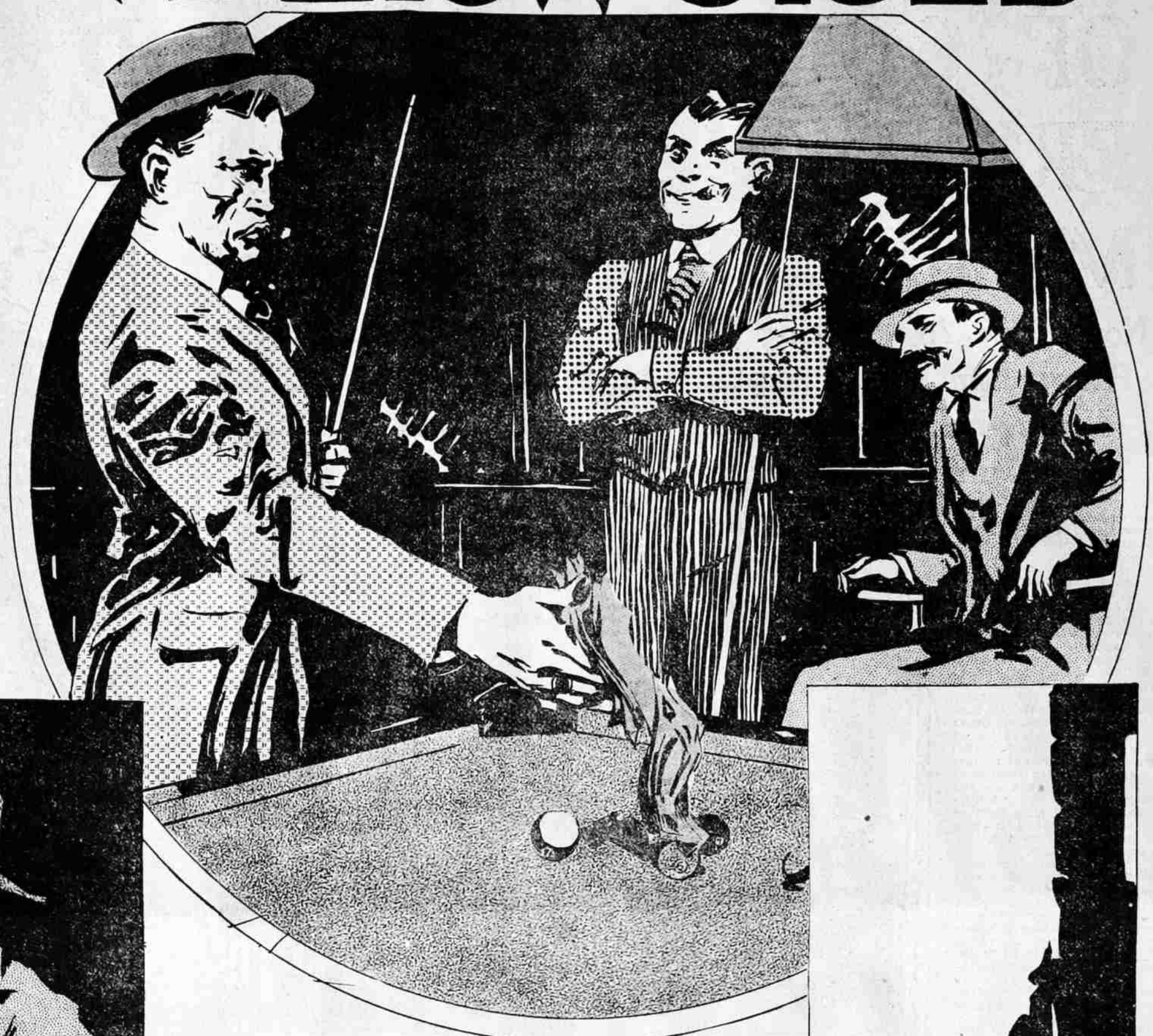
Magazine Feature Section

THE UNDERWORLD



"Tell the Sergeant. He'll Fix You Up All Right," Said the Patrolman.

There is a saying often heard in the underworld, to the effect that there is a sucker born every minute. How true this may be I cannot vouch for, as I never was much good at mathematics, but my friend and former cellmate, "Max the jew," told me yesterday that two born a minute is nearer the mark.

"It must be at least two a minute," said Max, "or how could business keep up so?"

"You don't mean business" I corrected, "you mean graft."

"Graft" retorted Max, "I ain't a grafter any more. That's a sucker's game. I am a business man, strict business in a store—no more taking jail chances for mine."

I had just met Max on S— street, for the first time in several years, and as he had looked more prosperous than I had ever seen him before—well groomed and tailored—I stopped and renewed our acquaintance, out of the curiosity his wealthy appearance aroused in me. When I knew Max formerly he had been a stall for pickpockets.

A LUCKY CROOK.

His remark concerning taking no more chances led me to draw him out about his present occupation, and as we walked along he told me the following story. "You see, Peters, one time I used to sell 'slum' (fake jewelry) and I got to know a lot of the manufacturers of the phony stuff. By luck, when I came out of 'stir' (prison) this last time I ran across a guy named Moranski that in the old days was in that line. I told him I was just out of hock and broke, and I asked him to grubstake me to some slum to peddle.

"It was sure my lucky day, Peters. Moranski gave me a card and told me to come to that address early next morning all dolled up ready to go to work selling goods behind a counter.

"The next morning I was there with bells on and got a job as a clerk in a swell fitted up little jewelry store on the main stem. Talk about suckers falling for phony slum—a locket worth a dime brings anywhere from 25 cents to $1.50 with a 25 per cent rakeoff for the salesman."

Max went on to tell of learning the stock and tag marks till I grew tired and said with disgust, "Aw, that is nothing but petty larceny."

"Petty larceny, hey?" snorted Max with some heat. "I got $69 for my bit yesterday; is that cheap graft?" And so, while his grafting pride was smarting under the lash of that "petty larceny" Max plunged into the meat of his story, which I will tell here in my own way.

Last week John Henry (argot for sucker) a celery grower from Kalamazoo, came to Chicago to transact a bit of business. Early Tuesday afternoon, his errand finished, having nothing particular to do until train time, John strolled along S— street enjoying the balmy air of the vacation city. Passing a small jewelry store with an ornate front and rich interior, his attention was drawn by a bargain in watches displayed in the window. After some hesitation he entered the store.

Our friend Max came forward and took him in tow, and before long sold him a solid gold watch, "worth every cent of $100," full jeweled movement, eighteen carat case, for $50 cash, together with a convincing piece of paper called an everlasting guarantee (but which, in reality, is a certificate of membership to the Sucker's Club of Illinois, unlimited.)

The watch is worth $4, but under the spell of Max's "oil" and the eighteen carat stamp on the solid silver case thinly gold plated John "Falls like a log." It happened that John knew a jewelry salesman stopping at the hotel and to him, an hour later, our celery grower showed his purchase and found out he had been tricked. With watch in one hand, guarantee in the other, and rage in his heart, John hurried back to the little store.

There Mr. Smooth Moranski, a stoutish gentleman of imperturbable calm, assured J. Henry that he must be mistaken in the address. "My dear sir, show me the person who sold you that watch—it never was in our stock I am sure."

For the very good reason that Max was not there J. H. could not point him out or anyone that looked like him.

"These two gentlemen and myself constitute our full force of employes," said the suave Moranki. "This should be brought to the attention of the police," he added as he ushered the bewildered man from Kalamazoo to the door.

TIME FOR GETAWAY.

As Moranski had said, there was only one course to pursue and it was with something of hopeful confidence that the sucker approached the officer on the corner and told him his troubles. The cop, hearing the tale of woe, smiled a pitying smile as he directed John to the nearest station-house. "Tell the sergeant. He'll fix you up all right," said the patrolman.

From the police station a plain-clothes man is detailed to go to the store with John, with the loud-voiced command "and bring that thief in with you when you come back."

An hour later he is back the second time in the station-house listening to the detective tell the sergeant or captain that "it is a puzzling case, boss; the store manager says he has no clerk of that description and no watches like this one in stock. He showed us his books and satisfactorily accounts for his two clerks—maybe Mr. Henry has the wrong shop in spite of the fact he says he remembers the place and the firm name over the door. There is no address or firm name on this guarantee."

"Well, Mr. Henry," said the commanding police officer, "we will detail our best men on this case and get the crook who robbed you."

AND NOTHING TO SHOW.

John Henry has not got much satisfaction, unless the knowledge that he was rolled for his money can be called satisfying—he has not even the phony watch for a souvenir because the plain-clothes man kept that for evidence in hunting down the thief. But the most interesting part of the affair is—where did Max go?

Almost at John Henry's heels he left the store. He did not go far—only a few blocks away is another small jewelry store—another of a chain of a half dozen scattered about the city, all owned by the same men. And there are several of these chains of small jewelry shops operated on the strength of the sucker being born every minute.

"But Max," I asked, "how can they keep right on doing business without being pinched?"

"Say, are you such a simp as to suppose the cops are not in with the play? That's what makes it safe. Most of the marks blow town before they get wise they have been trimmed and then it would cost them good hard cash to come back to make a "belch" (complaint); the guys that get hep to themselves in Chicago are stalled by the bulls.

"Some weeks at —— street station-house they have had ten to twenty suckers putting up a holler, but they never get a cent back. There ain't hardly a day passes that some chump copper don't get staked to a "finif" ($5 bill) by the boss, besides what he sends into the main guys for protection. Pretty soft for the uniformed burglars, ain't it?"

"Do you sell any other crooked stuff except watches?" I asked.

"Sure we do. Anything in the line of jewelry a John Henry or Jane asks for they get and get good," was the proud reply of Max.

"Say Max, what is your brother Sam doing these days?" I asked.

"Ten years," was the laconic reply.

"Is that so? What for?"

"He was nailed for a 'lemon' game two years ago and got a ten spot in Sing Sing. Sam was the slickest lemon steerer that ever held a cue in his hand," boasted Max.

For the benefit of those who have never been "steered against the 'lemon' and for some of the many who have lost hundreds and thousands of dollars to the workers in this line of graft, which originated in Chicago about fifteen years ago, I will explain what the lemon is.

The fifteen balls in the game of pool are numbered and colored to distinguish each from the other and the No. 1 ball is always a bright yellow. Thus, from its color likeness, it is called the lemon ball.

Tom, the steerer, an expert pool player, flashily dressed, leaves his two confederates at the Fashion billiard hall and goes out to corral a sucker. Across the street is the well-known Theater Grand.

One after another he approaches likely looking men, asks for a match and says "Stranger, where is the Theater Grand? I am lost in this burg—only got in from Philly last night. What—you don't say? And me right in front of it. That sticks me for an ice cream soda. Will you have a drink or cigar on me—I don't drink myself because I have to have steady nerves in my business."

HESITATE AND YOU'RE LOST.

If the come-on will stand and listen he is lost. With rapid spiel Tom explans how he came to Chicago to play a world's champion pool artist a match and shows his card (fake name) inscribed "Champion Pool Player, management of Augustus Blank.

Halting in front of the Fashion, Tom says, "Here's a billiard hall; come in, I'll show you how to clean up a pool table. I'll pay the bill."

Inside, he says, "Here, take a cue, I don't want to attract attention by playing alone."

With prodigious ease he makes marvelous shots—pockets all the balls in championship style, while John Chicago Henry admires. Harry, the "butter-in," now saunters over to them and butts in with a polite "Do you care to make the game three-handed, gentlemen?"

"Why, yes," says Tom, winking at John Henry, "but," he adds, "we are betting $10 on the one ball. Whoever pockets the yellow ball wins $10 from each player."

"That suits me," assents genial Harry, turning to the rack to select a cue.

While his back is turned Tom whispers to J. H., "We will divide this boob's money. Here take this ten spot and pay me when I win, but drop out and let me play him alone next game."

QUICK WORK AND BIG PAY.

Tom makes the lemon ball with ease—J. H. pays him the $10 and quits. Harry displays an amazing fat roll of yellow bills while settling with Tom. In short order J. H. sees Tom win three games and Harry pay him $40 in all.

The steerer bewails to his victim the fact that he has only a few dollars with him saying, "If you can dig up a few hundred to show this mark we can take him for his whole bankroll on one game. It's like stealing the money. He can't play to keep himself warm."

With such apparently easy money in sight John's cupidity is aroused; half of Harry's roll looks good to him. "Say, can you hold him while I go and get some dough out of the bank?" he asks Tom.

"Sure, if you hurry. Get all you can to make a big flash with."

J. H. hurries away, shadowed by Phil, a third lemon worker, who never loses sight of the mark and returns at his heels to the Fashion. John has been to the bank, drawn $1,000, and the shadow so reports to the crooks. On his return J. H. finds Tom still playing with Harry and learns he has won every game and is $80 winner.

After a whispered consultation between Tom and John Henry, Tom proposes to Harry to "make the game worth while. My friend here will cover any amount you would like to bet."

With practiced art the two fellow conspirators play their parts. Harry, with the reckless abandon of a fearless gambler, throws his roll on the pool table and says, "Cover that if you can."

Coolly and confidently Tom counts to see how much is there and finds $1,100. Bill the shadower is now sitting looking on and is made stakeholder, as being a stranger to the bettors. The game is played and Harry wins by an apparently clumsy fluke, or else Tom loses by a seemingly natural accident. Five times out of ten the victim will dig up more money "to get even," and be trimmed over again.

How to Bankrupt the Underworld

The slicker, formerly called a bunko-steerer, is often a criminal who has discovered that he has intelligence enough to outwit society and the law without using desperate methods.

Perhaps he has served a prison term because of cupidity. Upon his release from "stir" he determines to play a game of easy money which will have few dangers and, if he can "outsmart" his victims, plans an "easy money" scheme which depends for success upon his own failing—cupidity—a weakness his victim shares. The strangest part of the game of "easy money" is that the victim has been taught from childhood that "you can't get something for nothing." If this truth was accepted by all men the business of the bunko-man would soon be bankrupt.